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Alex Campbell: Spyblown

The Springing of George Blake by Sean Bourke

(Viking; \$6.95)

Sean Bourke and George Blake met in Wormwood Scrubbs, the London prison, where Bourke was serving seven years for sending a home-made bomb to a policeman he disliked, and Blake was doing 42 years, for spying for the Russians at the time he was supposed to be Britain's top spy. Blake suggested that when Bourke got out he help Blake escape. Bourke for reasons that are never made clear, for he was not a Communist, eagerly consented. What followed was pure comedy.

Bourke on his release got a job and lodgings near the prison. He bought a track suit and stop watch and raced around outside the prison walls, explaining to amused - or bemused - warders that he was doing it to keep fit. Having plotted Blake's escape route over the wall, he managed to smuggle in to Blake a walkie-talkie, bar-breaking implements, and other useful tools.

For months, Bourke outside and Blake inside held frequent conversations by walkie-talkie radio - "Baker Charlie to Fox Michael. Over." Blake solemnly impressed his rescuer with the need to "maintain the highest standards of security-mindedness throughout." Finally, the big night came. Several things went wrong. Bourke was badly delayed by a traffic jam, heavy rain, a guard with a watch-dog, a courting couple. When at last he got his rope ladder over the wall, Blake climbed it from the other side only to fall, hit his head and break his wrist, and be hauled into the getaway car by Bourke.

The escape succeeded nonetheless. Scotland Yard vainly scoured England, Ireland and the Continent for Blake. All the time, he was living with Bourke in an apartment only a few minutes' walk from Wormwood Scrubbs. Then the pair quietly left for East Berlin and so to Moscow.

Most of this sounds absolutely incredible. But it actually happened. And only last month.

reported that an inmate of Broadmoor, the British criminal lunatic asylum, was found to have constructed in his cell a laser beam that bored holes in half-inch thick steel.

Once in Moscow, Bourke discovered that he had unloosed a monster. Frankenstein wasn't in it. Blake not only lorded it over Bourke "the Irish peasant," he got so bored with his company he suggested to the Russian Secret Service that they liquidate the inconvenience. Happily for Bourke, they refused and in fact let him go to Eire from where, he says, the British are still trying to extradite him, no doubt wishing to return him to Wormwood Scrubbs. On past performance, that shouldn't detain him long.

Bourke immodestly quotes a lot of people calling him brave, and depicts Blake as a cowardly, double-dyed villain. A double agent Blake undeniably was and maybe still is, but Bourke's amazement that Blake quickly found his rescuer obnoxious will not be shared by the reader. Bourke emerges from his own pages as a cunning clod or perhaps, as Blake said, an Irish peasant. He endangered his own enterprise before the "springing" through heavy drinking, and once in Russia he drank, gluttonized and fornicated his way around the Soviet Union. Perhaps the KGB were glad to be rid of him.

The comedy continued to the very end. Bourke's presence in Moscow was supposed to be top secret. On a drunken impulse he placed a phone call to his brother in Ayr, Scotland; the call went through with no hindrance from the Russians. His brother Kevin rushed to Moscow to see him - his fare was paid by a British newspaper. The highest pitch of comedy is attained when the rescuer of George Blake and avowed hater of everything English gravely describes the British Embassy in Moscow as "that small patch of British soil."

And that's also the chief impression to be gained from the U-2 pilot's now-at-last-it-can-be-told tale, *Operation Overflight*, by Francis Gary Powers (Holt, Rinehart & Winston; \$6.95). When the Russians shot down Powers' spy plane, he had on him his DoD and NASA cards, Social Security and Selective Service cards, and driving licenses. "Be careful of that pin!" he yelled in warning, to the Russians who went through his pockets - the pin was smeared with curare. Pure comedy, and there was more to come. "I'm going to appeal to Mr. Khrushchev personally to be fair to my boy, as one old coalminer to another!" exclaimed Powers' dad. When Khrushchev failed to respond suitably, Dad jawed someone in Washington into offering to exchange the Soviet spy, Colonel Abel, for his boy, and the Russians agreed. Their parting word to Powers - "The next time you come to see us, come as a friend." Powers' own side was less kind.

He depicts his ex-wife as a frail reed, and the American public as complaining about his not jabbing himself with the pin; people asked indignantly what Powers thought he was being paid \$30,000 a year for, if not for that.

The commander of the captured spy ship *Pueblo* was also accused of humiliating surrender (*Bucher: My Story*, by Commander Lloyd M. Bucher; Doubleday; \$7.95) but in Bucher's case the American public were on the whole sympathetic; his accusers were top brass and windbag politicians. Bucher after being tortured by the North Koreans came close to being court-martialed back home. Yet a thoroughly botched operation was not his fault. What chance had a mission that called itself *Operation Clickbeetle*, and used a spy ship with a SOD-Hut (Special Operations Department) whose top-secret gear was installed upside down? So this is what the billions of dollars spent by the CIA and the Pentagon buy! Powers' farce at the end of the fifties and Bucher's complaint at the end of sixties show that the constant factor is clumsy incompetence in high